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ABSTRACT

Designed to be used as a self-study guide or as a tool in courses and workshops, this manual includes study questions for foster parents to use in working out their role with the biological parents of the children in their care. The first section describes the prime reason for involvement with the biological parent: to enable the child to love both sets of parents. The next section discusses the major reasons why children are placed in foster homes and the feelings of biological parents who must place their children in foster care. Foster parents are encouraged to explore their emotional reactions to each of these reasons for placement. In the next two sections foster parents' responses to biological parents' visits and behavior with their children and the feelings of biological parents in the same visitation situations are explored. Next examined are children's responses to separation from their parents. Suggestions are given for ways in which the foster parents can help a child maintain his or her connection with biological parents and ancestors. The following section describes ways in which foster parents can help the biological parent (i.e., by being a role model for family life, nurturing the biological parent, and providing a support system). The last section discusses the role of the agency and caseworker in facilitating communication between both sets of parents. (CB)

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WALK A MILE IN MY SHOES

A MANUAL ON BIOLOGICAL PARENTS FOR FOSTER PARENTS

By

Judith A. B. Lee

Danielle N. Park

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THIS MANUAL IS

DEDICATED TO FOSTER PARENTS

The authors recognize your special commitment to children and families. The purpose of this manual is to help you deepen your understanding of biological parents by helping you to walk a mile in their shoes. We hope this will help you have a richer, broader and more satisfying helping role with your foster child and his or her parents.

PREFACE

This manual was developed during 1979-80 as part of a Child Welfare Training Project at The University of Connecticut, School of Social Work.

The project, "Toward More Effective Work with Biological Parents," was funded through Grant No. 90-C-1441, U. S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Administration for Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau. Its purpose was to develop model training programs and curriculum materials useful to child welfare personnel in working with biological parents of children in foster care.

This manual is intended for foster parents and can be used as a self-study guide as well as a tool in courses and workshops for foster parents.

We would like to thank the authors, Judith A. B. Lee and Danielle N. Park, for the time and thought they put into preparation of the manual. We are grateful for the support of the Children's Bureau, which made the project possible. We also appreciate the Child Welfare League of America's permission to reprint quotes from a number of its publications, particularly Foster Parenting Young Children, by Evelyn Felker.

December 1980

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I. YOU AS A FOSTER FAMILY

As a foster family, you are very special people.

You have decided to provide care for children whose parents are not able to care for them. You have entered a special relationship with a child, a biological parent and an agency. You share rights and responsibilities with the biological parent and the agency. You are a member of a helping team working together toward the goal of helping the child.

Foster parenthood requires a very special kind of parenting — to have for a while, yet not to keep. To love, but not exclusively, to help the child and parent to maintain their ties. It is a very unselfish love -- directed more toward the other person than toward yourself. You are a person who feels you can help a child and his or her family without exclusive rights. This kind of giving of yourself is not easy, for you are human too.

One of the hardest parts of foster parenting is working out your role with the biological parent. When Johnny or Jean comes back from a visit with the parent upset or silent and sullen, you may have second thoughts. You may feel "I do all the work" and "she gets all the pleasure and love from the child," or "why does the agency permit and encourage these visits when the child gets so upset" or "why isn't she nicer to me, I do my best for her child." These are painful, understandable human feelings. Yet as a foster parent even more is required of you -- that you understand and try to help the very person who seems to hurt the child. Patience, warmth and understanding of the biological parent are essential "tools of your trade."

Once you have succeeded in really understanding the child's parent, it will not be as difficult a situation for you, for "understanding and tolerance are twin sisters."[1] The ability to help follows close behind.

Evelyn Felker, a foster parent herself, has developed the idea that foster parents "play second fiddle" to the biological parent "and must support the efforts of the parent to be a parent."[2] Yet this is often very hard to do. It is often easier to judge another than to understand.

An old Indian proverb asks us not to judge another before we walk a mile in his or her shoes. This manual will help you to walk this mile. Let us walk it together and deepen our understanding of the biological parents who must place their child in foster care. Who are these parents? How do they feel? Why do they do it? How can you as a foster parent help? This manual will give you suggestions around broadening your role with the biological parent.

The prime reason for your interest in the biological parent is the child. Although the child has now become a part of your family, she brings her own family with her in memory. She now has two sets of parents, which is often a source of conflict. The child may feel pulled by divided loyalties. It is important to help the child respect and love both sets of parents so that he or she does not feel torn. The child can love both sets of parents without choosing between them if you are able to develop a relationship of respect, understanding and concern toward the biological family.

You and your family have been approved to care for a foster child by an agency who values your parenting ability. Did you ever think what it would be like to be in the place of the biological parent? What it would be like to feel yourself, or have an agency tell you that for now you are not able to care for your child — that someone else needs to take over? What would it feel like to see your child go off with a social worker to an unknown place? You may say "but I would never let it happen!" Let us hope you never have to, but if you did, how would you feel about yourself, your child, the agency, the foster parent? How would you handle these feelings? Who would help you gain the strength to get your child back?

Let us visit a few biological mothers together and "walk a mile in their shoes."

II. UNDERSTANDING THE BIOLOGICAL PARENT

Who are the biological parents? Why are children placed? According to a research study, there are five major reasons why biological parents place their children:

1) physical illness or incapacity of the child-caring person, including confinement;
2) mental illness of the mother;
3) personality or emotional problems of the child;
4) severe neglect or abuse; and
5) other family problems including unwillingness or inability to continue care, desertion, parental incompetence, and arrest.[3]

Sometimes these reasons can combine in a landslide effect and sometimes one reason or another prevails. Financial difficulties can also complicate any problem, as you are well aware. In one study it was found that more than half of the families placing children were working class and the financial pressures added by lower incomes compounded the problems greatly.[4] For the majority of children and their families placement is an emergency, an unplanned traumatic experience in the lives of all concerned.[5] As foster mother Evelyn Felker says: "Many parents are coping with problems beyond the magnitude of anything we have experienced. There are varying degrees of success but I have found much to wonder at and admire."[6] We turn now to consider the reasons for placement, illustrating each with a true story to further help us get into the parents' shoes.[7]

1) Physical Illness

Have you ever been so sick that you needed friends and family to come help out? Whom did you call upon? Who came? What did they do? Did they care for your children? How did you feel about being sick and needing others to help you and your children? Pretty helpless? It can be a frightening situation. Maybe you were fortunate to have people to come to your aid while you were getting better.

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Physical illness, ranging from diseases like asthma and hepatitis to the need for surgery or pregnancy and gynecological problems, ranks high on the list of reasons for placement. Physical illness can happen to anyone. But when a parent does not have family or neighbors to pitch in and help, a child may have to leave home. Research has shown that most parents who place their children were ill at least a year prior to placement.

Here is a story of a parent who placed children while physically ill.

A mother, who was separated from her husband eight months prior to her illness, said:

> "I felt very tired and sick. and I went to a hospital in my neighborhood where they told me I need to be hospitalized immediately since I had hepatitis. I told them I had no one to take care of my children and the doctor took me to the hospital Social Service Department. They called the city social service department downtown and the children were placed. I have no friends here and the only one to take care of my children was my mother-in-law and she was in another country."8

2) Mental Illness

Society is harsh on people with "mental illness." Words like "crazy" or "incompetent" or "nuts" are thrown like stones at people who have experienced severe problems causing hospitalization. It is hard to get by those words without examining our own feelings about people who are so labeled. We may be frightened or anxious in their presence. We may think "it's inherited" and the children have "bad blood." We may try to avoid sharing the "facts" with others.

But have you ever felt lonely and blue? Deep depression can become immobilizing. Have you ever felt nervous, so nervous that you could not concentrate or perform your daily tasks? Have you ever been in a "pressure-cooker" situation, when you felt like you would explode if just one more thing happened? All of these are normal feelings. When they are felt in the extreme and for long periods of time, a breakdown of ability to

cope may be experienced. Pressures can be from within or without. Extreme pressures or crisis situations can be too hard for some people to handle, especially when there are not others to rely upon for help and support.

Here is a story of a parent who placed her children while experiencing such severe problems in living.

> "I had a nervous breakdown and I knew I was not myself. I asked my neighbor to call the police because I was so nervous and confused. My vision was blurred. I could not touch anything that was not colored blue. I was not paying attention to the baby. I would feel sad for long periods of time. My sister committed suicide four years ago so when I began not to feel myself I got help. The police came for the baby."9

3) Problems of the Child

Sometimes a child is born "different," physically, emotionally, or intellectually. A child with a serious physical impairment or deformity, or a child who is not responsive to a parent's affection (such as an autistic child), or a child born profoundly retarded can sometimes be too much for a family to handle, particularly when there are other stresses. At times the child's trouble is not evident at birth. For example, emotional problems can show up later.

There might come a point when relatives, friends, neighbors, or teachers bring the child's problems to the parents' attention. Sometimes the child begins to "act up" in school. He is not learning, is sullen, withdrawn or "fresh"; he may begin to be truant and to "hang around" with "the wrong crowd." As he gets older he won't listen and obey; he may fight with the parents, who are at their wits' end. Family life is horrible; the parents are aware that the situation has become so bad that they can no longer help. With the social worker's help, some parents send their children to special boarding schools or residential treatment centers while others place them in foster homes. The "change of climate" emotionally as well as socially and physically can be a real help.

Here are two stories of placement due to the problems of the child:

"My baby was born retarded and without an esophagus. I was 20 and had two children at home. I just couldn't feed the baby, although the nurses showed me how to use a feeding tube. It was just too much for me. My husband was more afraid of the baby than I was. He couldn't touch him. My mother was sick herself and couldn't help. The foster mother was helpful. I began to learn from her, but it took me a long time to cope with it..."

Another mother reported on the placement of a 13 year old girl as follows:

"She stopped going to school, because she seemed unable to attend a function with a large group of people. She has a speech defect. She speaks very nasally since she had her tonsils out four years ago. She sounded like Donald Duck and became unhappy and withdrawn because the children teased her. At the same time I broke up with my husband...She criticized me and opposed me in every way...Around Christmas she threw things at me, blamed me for throwing her father out, and for her operation..."10

4) Severe Neglect or Abuse

Some reasons for placement are easier to take and to understand than others. Abuse and neglect is one of the hardest to deal with for both social workers and foster parents. We become angry when we think of a child being left alone, or without adequate food and clothing, or when a child is beaten and bruised. We cannot understand it and may judge these parents harshly without getting into their shoes. As we look at these parents it is helpful to say to ourselves, "once they were children... children who were shaped and molded into what they are today." Many studies indicate that neglectful parents were unloved as children, and abusive parents were abused as children.[11]

Here are two stories of parents who placed their children due to abuse or neglect:

"It was the coldest winter. Everyone was freezing to death. I was alone with the four kids. We had no heat and hot water. After the fire, we didn't have beds and many of our clothes were gone. So we just slept on the floor. I didn't care anymore; I knew the baby needed milk and warm clothes but what

could I do? When the police came they sent me to the hospital, and took the kids away. I tried to fight them, but I had no strength left. I guess I knew they'd be better off without me. What could I do?"

Another mother stated:

"I couldn't stand the crying. She never stopped crying once since she was born. I was crying a lot myself since my husband left me when she was three months old. He used to beat me and I was glad he was gone. But I was scared alone. She was a colicky baby, cried all hours of the night. Nothing I could do would stop it.

Finally I just hauled off and smacked her. She cried louder than ever. I grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her in the crib. I guess her head hit the headboard, she went limp. I thought she was dead. I was so scared. I rushed her to Emergency and told the doctor she fell off the bed..."

5) Other Family Problems

In a sense all of the reasons discussed so far were also family problems. If families are strong and supportive enough, placement is often avoidable. But when families come apart at their seams, both parents and children are in trouble. It is often hard to know what comes first, "the chicken or the egg." When one or both parents desert the home, or become alcoholic or addicted, or when parents constantly fight, even physically, the children may need placement. It is not easy to understand how a parent becomes so self absorbed, or literally absorbed in alcohol, or in brutal fighting. Desertion or abandonment is even harder to understand. But people have reasons for flight which they may never share. Seldom do we know or understand the whole story.

Here are two stories of severe family problems causing placement:

A father says:

"About four weeks ago my wife ran away from home with another man. She left me, our home and children and went to Puerto Rico. I was desperate, being alone with the children and having no one to take care of them while I worked, so it was necessary to put them in homes until I could think more clearly.

I didn't think my wife and I had any problems. We were happy until one day a month ago she asked if she could go to the movies. I said 'yes' and she went out and never came back...Now looking back I remember that a few months ago she began to say she was bored and sick of everything...I just laughed it off. What an idiot I was. She was seeing another man."

An aunt of a seven year old girl who went into placement said of her sister, the child's mother:

"She drank to excess and had been living in rooming houses financed by Welfare. The child was underfed and undernourished. We tried to help her and then washed our hands of it. She was no longer my sister as far as I was concerned. This Christmas I visited her and she was in bad shape with arthritis, lying on the floor and unable to move. The child took care of herself. We took the child and called the Board of Health. My sister was starving...Empty bottles were all over the apartment. The Welfare Center pleaded with us to keep the child but it is not our problem...She was getting too attached to us. I called Welfare and said I would leave the child at his desk and they said I should take her to a hospital for a check-up. Finally she was placed (in a shelter)..."12

Some Time to Stop and Think:

How do you feel about these parents? Can you understand? Can you examine the different thoughts and feelings you have about each of the five reasons for placement?

As a foster parent, how could you help the parents as well as the child? You might want to write some of your thoughts and feelings down.

III. YOU HAVE FEELINGS

Why is it so hard for me to relate to the biological parents sometimes?

You have just been thinking about the feelings you have about the various reasons for placement. Have you been angry at some of the parents? Have you felt sorry for some? Have you felt compassion for some? You have a right to know who the biological parents are, and why the child was placed. If this is not known, you need to know that too. Yet this information needs to be handled wisely by you. It is important to know and look at what you feel about the biological parent, since feelings get communicated through what you don't say as well as through what you say. Somehow children know what you feel about their parents, and the parents know too. You need a chance to think this through for yourself so you can give helpful responses, by deed as well as word.

As Dr. Ner Littner recognizes, "It is not easy to be a foster parent. In many ways the pressures on foster parents are far greater than those encountered by parents looking after their own children. To the degree that foster parents are aware of these pressures and to the degree that foster parents work at coping with these pressures, they make their tasks interesting, rewarding and fulfilling. They will be able to accomplish their cherished goal of helping children who need their help."[13] Further, Littner recognizes that dealing with the biological parents is often the critical pressure or "trouble spot" for you as a foster parent.[14] Evelyn Felker, a foster mother, says the same thing from the foster parents' shoes: "My inclination with some parents, unfortunately, is to forget they exist. Sometimes I want to think a beautiful child will not have to go back to a place where he was so unhappy. I have to fight that inclination, and so will you for the sake of yourself and the child."[15]

Can you examine your thoughts and feelings as openly as Mrs. Felker did?

In this space write down some of your reactions to one or more biological parents that you have known. Please write as many positive and negative feelings and thoughts as you can recall. What did you like or admire? What did you find confusing or difficult, what got on your nerves, and so forth. If you have not yet known any biological parents, try to say what you think your reactions might be, basing some of this on the stories in the preceding section.

You might also consider your reactions to the following situations:

1) Billy's mother rarely visits; his back is covered with deep skin grafting scars from having a pot of boiling water spilled "accidentally" on his back. Every time I look at his back I think:

2) She's late every time she comes. Sometimes she doesn't come at all, and she doesn't call. Sally just sits by the window staring out and doesn't let us talk to her. When she finally gets here, she brings tons of potato chips and candy. Sometimes she's a little drunk. Sometimes she has a strange man with her. She talks loud and dresses sloppily. Every time she is scheduled to come I think:

3) Damien is so happy to see them. It doesn't seem to bother him that they are addicts. It's "Mommy Diane this," and "Daddy Joe that," for weeks after. You'd think they can do no wrong. They told him that all we want is the city money and that they'll take him home "in a few weeks." It's been a year and he still believes them. They wear leather coats and act superior to us. Imagine that. They treat us like servants! I try to keep my mouth shut but inside I feel:

Perhaps this has helped you to put your feelings into words. Many foster parents share your feelings, for you are often in a real bind. Perhaps coming to grips with your feelings will free you to reach out to the biological parent a little bit more. In the next section, let us look at it from the other side

IV. BIOLOGICAL PARENTS HAVE FEELINGS TOO

A lot has been said about "maternal deprivation," or what it means for a child to be deprived of the biological parent. Have you ever thought about what it means to the parent to be deprived of the child -- to be a mother without a child? Researchers have been finding that such "filial deprivation," is an enormous loss to the parent. The feelings of sadness, guilt, relief and anger are the same whether or not the parent voluntarily placed the child or the child was taken away by the Court.[16]

Let's look back at Billy, Sally, and Damien's parents. Perhaps their feelings had something to do with their behavior.

1) "I am Billy's Mother, my name is Ruthie. I'm a very nervous person. I didn't mean for that water to fall on him. He was always under my feet; it just happened. I feel so guilty. I can't look him in the eyes again. I can't go to his foster home. What will they think of me? I can't sleep thinking about it myself. I close my eyes and see Billy screaming. I'm so ashamed. I miss him so much. I need him. I wish it had scalded me instead. I'm so nervous. I just can't face him again."

2) "I'm Gloria, Sally's Mother. I don't know why they didn't place her with her brothers. I feel more comfortable at their foster home, they're sort of outgoing and don't seem to mind my ways or my boyfriends. But here everything is proper. It scares me. The house is so nice and neat, they eat on time, they go to church. They must think I'm a sinner for sure. And Sally sitting by that window makes me feel so bad. What is she thinking? Her eyes condemn me. I can't take her home. I worry so much it makes me late. I take a little drink and bring a boyfriend along to give me courage. I want to give her something. She likes candy, but I wish I had money to buy her something real nice. Maybe I'd like to buy her a new Mother and start all over again. I love my kids so much, how did it all go so wrong?"

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3) Damien's Mother: "Yeah, so he was born with withdrawal symptoms, but that don't mean we're junkies. I mean we experimented a little bit, but they didn't have to take the kid. Well, Joe did mainline, but I never did. I could have taken care of him. They didn't even give me a chance. So what do I care? I can have more kids. Now they want us to sign for adoption. Forget it — we'll never sign, especially to give him to those foster parents. They think they're so perfect, they don't even have good furniture. Oh what am I talking about? They're good people, but we don't have anything that counts; they have it all. I feel so empty inside. Why can't I leave Joe? Then they'd let me have him. Oh forget it, I can't handle it anyway. I guess I'm just a junkie after all."

What are those parents feeling?

How can you help?

Write in the feelings you perceive here. Are they feeling frightened, guilty, inadequate, inferior, angry, upset?

Biological Parent #1	Biological Parent #2	Biological Parent #3

Here are two parents who share how they feel about foster parents who have been helpful to them. Do you see yourself in these examples?

Mrs. McAdams:

"...The fact that you are visiting your child in a foster home is a reminder you are, at least for the time being, a failure as a parent. You are very sensitive, especially during the first visits. Sometimes a foster parent, in a well-meaning effort to let you know that your child is doing well in a foster home, will make comments on how well the child is eating, how neat he keeps himself and his room, how happy he is, etc. To me, this type of remark was just an implied criticism of the care I had given my child, and was a verbal slap in the face....

It would have been easier to talk to my children if I had been kept up to date on what they had been doing. I understand that frequent phone calls can be very disruptive, but perhaps if a foster parent could just have dropped a brief note on a postcard once a week, it would have made communication between my child and me less strained....

It is surprising how many legitimate excuses you can come up with to avoid visiting your children in foster homes. Sometimes a failure to visit frequently on the part of the natural parents is not an indication that they don't care, but that they care too much....

You see your child in a home situation where everything is apparently orderly and calm, and quite often materially superior to anything you are going to be able to offer them, and you wonder why the hell you are bothering to rock the boat...sometimes staying away is the easiest for everyone; but when your whole life has been torn up and you are somehow trying to reassemble the pieces, I don't see how things could be easy....

The foster parent who gives you orders and instructions in the presence of your child is another problem. You are told that you should have the child back in the foster home at 5 o'clock, and admonished not to be late; or you are told to be sure little Tommy doesn't go outside without his sweater, as he has just recovered from a cold. These instructions may be necessary but your kid, no matter how young, is already aware of the fact that you have little authority at this time, and this only increases the child's concern as to how responsible you are. If it is necessary to give the natural parent instructions about taking the child away from the foster home on an outing, it would be better to do so out of the child's presence....

No matter how courteous a foster parent is, the natural parents still have the feeling that they have very little to say in the decisions made for their child. There is no reason why the natural parents can't be consulted on some of the decisions regarding the child, even if they are only small ones, such as the color of a soon-to-be purchased coat, or the advisability of getting a haircut. Being asked your opinion on matters concerning your child is a step toward the time when you will be making decisions yourself again, and will help restore your confidence in your ability to do so. I think it is the responsibility of both the social worker and the child's foster parent to involve the natural parent even if she doesn't show too much interest in being involved...."[17]

Another mother told her story this way:

"You're going to visit your children in somebody's else's home. They are doing what you should be able to do for them. The guilt complex is overwhelming. You just can't describe it—walking into a house and having your children call somebody else Mommy and Daddy. You want them to. You want them to be treated as their own children. You want them to call them Mommy and Daddy, to feel this much relaxed with them, to go to them with their problems, but you don't want it. You are their mother. They are nothing but caretakers for the children, and this is very difficult to face. But I walked in the house anyway; I walked in the first foster parents house that I walked into and was...Bless this woman, bless Lucille. I knocked on the door and the kids opened the door because they were expecting me and they went, "Mommy, Mommy," and they jumped all around me and I stood there stiffly afraid to walk in the front door.

She was in the kitchen...She said, "Hi, come right in. The coffee's on the stove, the cups are up here -- grab a cup. Sit down and we'll talk." Like I was a neighbor, not like I was company coming to visit her home. Like I was a neighbor, this was something I did every day, I walked in and grabbed a coffee cup off the shelf, poured myself a cup, and it totally relaxed me.

I think it might have scared me away if they had been dressed up as if it were a Sunday afternoon visit, had ushered me into the parlor where I sat there very stiffly and said to my children, "How do you do?" But here I was taken as a friend. I was not asked questions, not even, "How are you doing?" We talked about the weather and I don't really remember vividly, but I remember the conversations were very general...It was like two neighbors sitting down and talking.

She suggested to the children that they bring me outside to show me some pets that they had in the backyard, to give me a chance to be with my children without her making some excuse -- "Well, I'll go upstairs and powder the nose. Bless this woman, Lucille...."[18]

Can you list ways the foster parents in the above situation were helpful?

_____ _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

V. THE CHILD HAS FEELINGS, AND CONNECTIONS TO MAINTAIN

Foster parents often ask, "Why do I have to help the biological parent; why can't I just help the child?"

The Child as Part of the Family System

One reason for helping the biological parent is that the child is a part of a family system -- just as you are.

What is a system? Family experts say the family is a system of interactions; there is no such thing as individual problems -- all actions and interactions are part of a family process.[19]

Think of your own family. Can one hurt without the others hurting, or have a joyful moment without sharing it? Would a change in employment affect all of you? Or if one of the children became ill, wouldn't you all respond? If a child goes away to college or into the Armed Services, isn't he or she still a part of the family?

A foster child too is born into a family system. His or her removal from this system throws it out of kilter. Part of our job is to restore the integrity of that system, to help it attain a new and better balance with the child as a part of it.

When we think of a child we think of his parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins and close family friends. A foster family becomes a "support system" for the child when these natural support systems are not able to help for the while. If we can see a child in all of her connectedness, we can help her maintain a sense of it and to stay a part of it even though temporarily it cannot "take her in."

How can you help the child remember and stay in touch with her family system? You might want to jot down a few ideas here.

You might also want to make some comments on how your own family works as a system of support.

The Child's Feelings About Separation

From birth to death we as human beings experience many separations. Somehow, they are never easy, and the way we deal with them in early years will influence our later handling. Separation can also be growth promoting. From our initial separation from the womb to letting go of mother's hand and walking alone, or our first day at school, we build upon experiences of separation as growth producing, if a little scary. As we are reassured that mother and father will still be there for us when we return, we are able to venture forth. Can you remember some important separations in your childhood or adult life? Have you lost someone special by distance, or even by death? How did you feel? What were some of your reactions and ways of handling it?

Foster children are often torn away from mothers and fathers with no real reassurance of their return, for indeed the parent is suddenly no longer there. As Dr. Littner says: "The placed child never really understands why his natural parents have left him. No matter what the realistic reason for the placement, the placed child develops a series of irrational explanations that he buries deeply in his mind...He was placed because he was bad and the placement is his punishment; his natural parents have rejected and abandoned him and he will never see them again; his natural parents have lied; etc., etc."[20]

A child may need help expressing his feelings, for they are often in conflict. He may both love and hate the parent who left him. He may feel that placement "is being done to him" and he cannot control his situation.[21] We must remember "no child wants his parents more than a rejected child."[22] Do you think a child should talk about those feelings? Eight year old Travis thought so:

> "The social worker asked Travis how he felt about leaving home. Travis was quiet, pensive. The worker tried again — 'How did it make you feel?' Travis answered: 'I felt dull.' The social worker asked what does one do when one feels dull? Travis answered, 'Just sits down.' The social worker asked, 'Just sit down and wait for it to go away?' Travis said, 'um.' The social worker asked: 'Does anything help to make it go away faster?' Travis said, 'Only one thing.' Social worker asked, 'What's that?' Travis replied, 'When somebody talks to me.'"[23]

How can you help the child to express his or her feelings about losing the parents and coming into placement and your home. You might jot down some thoughts on this.

The Hidden Parent

Let us begin by considering the following: "The absent parent becomes an important part of a child's 'fantasy life' and has strong directional influence on what a child will become and how comfortably he can live with himself. When social workers and foster parents ignore the absent parent, it is to the child as though they had killed her. Parents artificially killed in this way will 'arise from the dead' and haunt!"[24]

Although we may prefer to feel that "out of sight is out of mind," it really isn't so for the foster child. Your help is needed to help the child think about what has happened to himself or herself and to his/her parents. According to Almeda Jolowicz, who wrote an important article entitled, "The Hidden Parent,", "We have to accept the concept that the child does have an inner life in which he maintains a parent-child relationship. There are numberless cases to prove that the physical separation of parent and child is not a sufficient measure to interrupt the influence of the biological parent upon the child. On the contrary, the separation may lead to the child's idealizing the parent."[25]

Lila's situation illustrates these points. Lila came to the Adam foster family when she was seven. She immediately began a pattern of sitting alone in her room. When other children were playing outside, she would quietly slip up to her room. The Adams asked what she was doing in her room. She answered -- "thinking." The Adams asked her finally what she thought of while sitting alone in her room. She replied: "I think about my daddy. I miss him." She then opened her thoughts and the Adams were astonished at all the work Lila was doing in piecing her life together.

Foster children need to be encouraged to share their thoughts, feelings, and fantasies about their parents and how and why they were placed.

Evelyn Felker gives some helpful hints in this area: "Because the child does not remember the parent or does not talk about the absent parent

does not relieve you of the responsibility to keep communication open. Of course, you do not want to stir up emotional debris of a settled situation. But in most cases you can make a casual reference such as, 'You must have gotten those pretty blue eyes from the mother,' or 'Did you know your daddy was over six feet tall?' For the child who may want to ask questions and is afraid you do not want him to, this is sufficient opening."[26]

How would <u>you</u> talk to your foster child about his or her biological parents? Can you give examples of how you've tried to do this with your foster child?

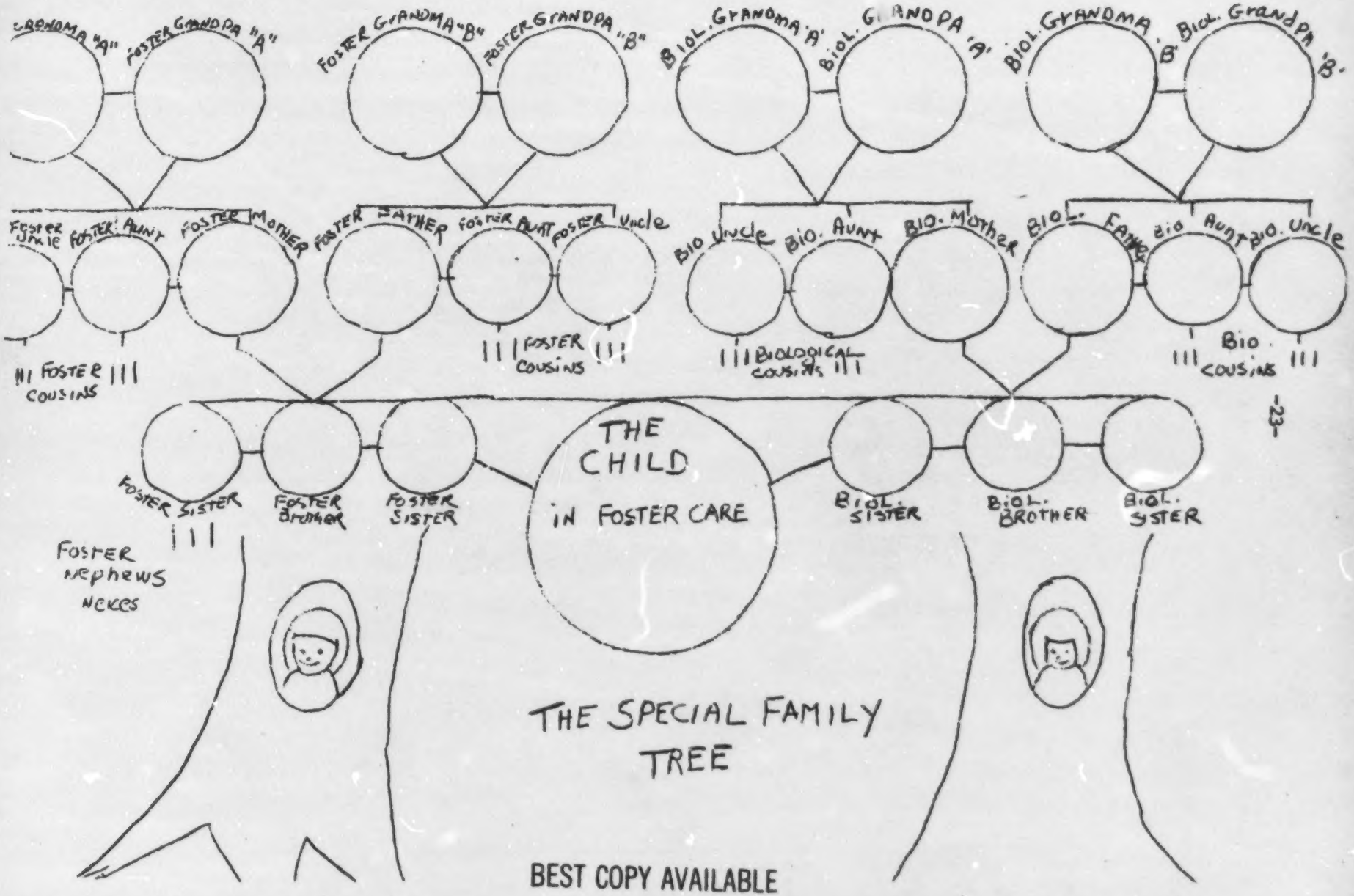
<u>Roots</u>

It is very popular today for families to trace their roots. Have you ever wondered who your ancestors are and where they came from? You might like to develop a family tree for yourself and your foster child. (See "the Special Family Tree" on page 23.) It would be a fascinating activity to do together, as it is fun and it shows your willingness to let the child have his or her two families.

In developing this family tree, you may need the social worker to help dig up the foster child's family history. Remember most of us don't know who <u>all</u> of our ancestors are. Placing your tree next to the foster child's tree shows the connection that the foster child is a part of two families. The questions this may raise for the child will be important ones; they deserve discussion and honest, understanding answers. Perhaps

you can think about how you might respond to some of the questions your foster child might raise.

Another thing you might like to do is to make a "Story of My Life Album" with the child. You can involve the parents in bringing pictures and memorabilia and in working on the album with the child. The album should include items such as a copy of the child's birth certificate, baptismal papers and all available records and pictures and important "quotes" of family members, including names of all the people the child has lived with -- from birth to the present. It can reflect the child's life with the biological family and the foster family. The trees and the album are a way of helping the foster child to pull his or her life together in a meaningful way.



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VI. YOUR HELPING ROLE WITH BIOLOGICAL PARENTS

When you add up all the dimensions of who the biological parent is and how important he or she is to the child, the importance of your role in helping the biological parent becomes clear. First, you provide a role model for mothering and family life.[27] Many parents have never had good mothering or much of a family life. As Chan.ley says, "the love-starved parents are as entitled to compassion as the love-starved children."[28] This implies that you can also provide a nurturing relationship for the biological parent. You can also become part of this parent's support system. Part of the reason for placement is often that natural support systems have been overtaxed and have broken down. You can become a strong new link of support.

Role Model

Although social workers and foster parents both provide support and help to the parent, you are in the best position for role modeling. The child is a part of your family and, while it may not be perfect (whose is!?), it is a child's frame of reference for family life. Role modeling takes place by work and deed. You might be able to tell the parent how you operate in some of these areas, but more will be "caught than taught". As you provide a relaxed and friendly atmosphere for visiting in your home, the role modeling will go on.

The following are some areas that can be modeled: (1) loving and caring; (2) sharing and giving; (3) structure and limits; (4) discipline; (5) daily problem solving; (6) mutual respect; (7) a value on individual separation and growth; (8) values such as patience, tolerance of difference and fair play; (9) dealing with feelings that are both painful and positive; (10) communication; (11) household management and child management techniques .[29]

Can you think of some examples of how you have been a role model?

Nurturing

You provide an atmosphere of warmth, understanding, caring and structure for a foster child. You accept a child for what he or she is even though you may not accept some of the behavior. Providing these needed emotional supplies is what we define as nurturing. You may also extend some of this nurturing to the biological parents. Each one of us provides love and caring in our own way. Some are outgoing and demonstrative, while others are more quietly respectful and accepting. You must stay with your own style of expression with both the foster child and the parent. As we have seen, the biological parent is usually very hard on herself or himself. He or she is full of guilt and self-recrimination. Your acceptance and respect can be a strong force in the process of building their self-esteem and competence.

Have you ever experienced someone outside of your family who provided you with nurturance? What was the experience like? Did you ever provide nurture to a person in need? What was the experience like? Can you imagine your nurturing role with a biological parent?

Providing a Support System

Studies have shown that people rely on natural helping networks. This network may or may not be bound by geography or distance, but it is made up of relationships that are reliable and dependable. These include examples, such as a neighbor who brings a pot of soup to a sick neighbor or another neighbor who is willing to mind the children when needed, or a friend who provides a shoulder to cry upon when one faces great loss.[30]

Whom do you turn to in a time of need? Are there family, friends and neighbors that you can count on? Is there a religious or community leader who has been of help? Can you imagine what it would be like to have no one to turn to? What are some examples of your support systems?

Can you be such a person in the network of the biological parents? In what ways can you provide a support system?

Some Principles for Helping Biological Parents

Evelyn Felker -- a foster parent -- suggests a number of ways through which foster parents can help biological parents. The following are excerpted from her book.[31]

(1) "Support the efforts of the parent to be a parent.

> By your standards a particular mother may be inadequate and it may seem as though she only makes things worse for the child when she acts. But you have to start somewhere. Let me give an example. The parent asks you as she brings the child home to you after a visit, "Does Sue need anything I could get her?" So you think a minute and say, "Well, yes. She could use a dress to wear when the choir at school gives its concert next month. It's supposed to be fairly simple and a pastel color. She takes a size 10 now." Next week the parent brings the dress. It is red-dotted swiss, with seven ruffles of lace down the skirt, white collar and cuffs, and is marked "Dry Clean Only."
>
> Your first reaction may be to treat the parent like a not-too-bright teenager. You use the occasion to impress on the parent just how inadequate she is. You say that the dress will not do because it is the wrong color -- you told her pastel. You ask her to take it back and get some underwear. (You probably will not get the underwear and I do not blame the mother.) Then you point out to Sue that she does not have a new dress for the concert like the other girls because her mother did not get the right one, even though you told her what Sue needed.

Something like the following is what you should say. You thank her for the dress, let Sue try it on so the mother can see how pretty it looks, and mention that though you are not sure they are going to wear any red dresses to the concert, there is another occasion coming up when the dress will be just right. You explain to Sue that this is a very good dress and she will be able to wear it only for special occasions because it must be dry-cleaned. But then it's too pretty to wear just any old time anyway. You can comment that the size 10 fits and it is lucky her mother was able to judge her size so well.

Do you think the first reaction was extreme and that anyone would know better than to react that way? Not at all. Ask any caseworker and be honest about your own feelings. You will find that the reaction is natural, and must be fought. The principle of accepting what the parent can do now in a way that encouragns better performance in the future needs constant, imaginative application.

(2) Play second fiddle to his own parents.

The next principle calls for unselfishness. If you are doing a proper job of parenting a foster child, the great bulk of his needs is being met by you. But he has one need you cannot meet — he needs to be able to love his parents. This works out differently at different ages, but the need is never absent. You hope his need is met eventually by a corresponding need of his parents to love him, and you do all you can to foster and strengthen love between them...

No matter how long he lives with you, you must be willing to accept the fact that the child has membership in another family by birth and he may very well prefer, at least at times, to emphasize that membership rather than the voluntary relation of caring he has with you.

Before I give you the wrong impression: I wrote of unselfishness, not martyrdom on your part. Be sensible. If you think about it you know when what is being asked of you is ridiculous or impractical. You and the child are obligated to live in a real world, and so are his parents.

(3) Do not play games.

You may find yourself in the middle of a disagreement between the parents and the caseworker, which results in conflict between you and the caseworker...The point is do not let yourself get caught in the middle of the biological parent and child or the biological parent and caseworker.

(4) Be honest with the parents.

Being honest with the parents may be a lot harder than it sounds. For one thing, it means that you cannot enter into the unreal world of planning for the impossible that some parents create. Being honest does not mean passing judgment or saying everything you think. It does mean that you will not enter into the evasions of the parent or practice them yourself. Nor should you pretend to be the parent's friend and actually be undermining his position with his child.

Of course, when even a small step is taken that may lead to growth in the parent and possible restoration of the family, it should be met with encouragement.

(5) Support the caseworker-parent relationship.

For various reasons a great deal of distrust and hostility may be directed toward the caseworker by the parents. The parents' widespread resentment of the conditions of their lives is frequently directed at the agency. Many who receive much help from welfare agencies resent both the need for help and the people through whom it is delivered. The childcare worker may be the target of resentment that has little direct connection with her actions.

In this situation, you can help by explaining to the parent the actions the caseworker takes...But do not forget you want to increase understanding, not take sides.

Possibly you can also help the caseworker understand the parent. You may have opportunity to see a side of the parent the caseworker never sees...

Never conceal from the caseworker anything you accidentally learn about the parent that will affect the child's welfare, and never agree to keep such a confidence from her. If you have ethical problems with this, remember that you are taking care of the child and your first responsibility is to the child. If the mother says, "I'll tell you something if you promise to keep it a secret," you should say, "No, I can't promise that, but I will promise to do what I think is right and what I think is best for Joey."

(6) Do not overreact to criticism.

Another thing that sometimes disturbs foster parents is a tendency on the part of parents to belittle or undercut them. The foster parent must develop enough toughness and understanding to take this in stride. The specific complaint is usually petty -- maybe the parent finds something to

criticize about the way the child is dressed when she visits. Or in your presence the parent encourages the child to complain about his situation, and promises all this will change when he returns home.

Try to remember that the parent knows that you are doing the job she should be doing, and that merely your existence is difficult for her to accept. The less adequately she was doing the job -- and the more her personal inadequacy rather than the circumstances is the cause of the child's being in foster care, the more picky she may be with you. Just do not let it get under your skin -- and do not take it out on the child. If it is a persistent problem, you should say quite matter-of-factly that you are doing the best you can and that her criticisms make it harder for you to help her child. I doubt if this will do much good, but it might make you feel better. I surely would not rebuke the mother in the child's hearing. The child may be feeling uncomfortable about the parent's complaints, and torn between two loyalties.

I do not want to imply that getting to know these parents is all problems and all giving on your part. It can be an experience that tremendously enriches your life."

VII. YOU ARE NOT ALONE — THE AGENCY IS YOUR PARTNER

In this manual an attempt has been made to broaden your role with the biological parent. However, you are not alone in your function of helping the biological parent as well as the child. The social worker and the agency should be right next to you, supporting you in your efforts and making major efforts of their own.

You and the social worker are part of the helping team. The various parallel roles and tasks of each team member should be recognized. The worker performs the role of mediator and coordinator among the various parts of the team. As such, the worker is available to facilitate communication among you, the child, and the biological parent when the situation warrants it. As noted earlier, there are roles that only you can play and there are roles the social worker plays. It is important not to take too much on yourself. It is critical to use the social worker for your own support when you are doing so much to help the family. How can you use the social worker?

Evelyn Felker says: "The agency retains responsibility for the child and delegates the care to you; the caseworker will be keeping track of the welfare of the child. She should check to see how you are doing, make inquiries about the child, be concerned with all aspects of his development. She should know the questions to ask and you should expect her to ask them and give her full answers.

In addition to serving you and the child, the caseworker may act as the contact between the parents and the agency. She may have responsibility for obtaining services they need, especially placing them in contact with those that will help the parents get ready to resume care of their child. She will help to arrange visits with the guidelines the court or agency has set for the child. She may even pick the child up for such visits or accompany the parents to your home.

In another area of responsibility, the caseworker is available to help you solve problems and to answer your questions. It is not an imposition to ask for help. You will never reach the point where you know all there is to know about caring for foster children, and the caseworker is continuously involved in training you to do the job better. As you attempt to help a particular child, you will be learning together.[32]

Additionally, the agency may provide group services for foster parents. In this way you have two major support systems, your social worker and the other foster parents in the group. Each has special knowledge and experience to share with you. Each will help you with your feelings and with the difficult tasks of being a helper to the biological parents as well as the child. The social worker can help you establish a mutually satisfying visiting plan and augment your efforts to help the biological parent to be a parent. Just as agency resources are available to you and your foster child, there are resources for biological parents which you can help them to obtain.

Your input into the process of helping the foster child and his family is critical. You see a side of each that a social worker usually does not see. Your observations of the parent-child relationship and the strengths and weaknesses of each can enrich and deepen the nature of the helping plan. Your help to the biological parent as the child's caretaker, a role model, nurturer and support system is your unique contribution to the foster child and his or her family. Together you, the biological parent and the agency will then be able to move toward the best possible permanent plan for the child.[33]

VIII. CONCLUSION

This manual was intended to help you walk a mile in the shoes of the biological parent so that you could broaden your understanding and formulation of your role as foster parents to include helping the parent. It is hoped that deeper knowledge and understanding of who the biological parent is, the reasons for placement, an examination of your feelings about biological parents and some ideas on how you can help will free you to be a more effective helper to the child within his or her biological family system.

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